

Kameradschaft (1931) G W Pabst.

Aka Comradeship (recent English title)

P Michell, 2014

Little known early German fantastic realist film that predates Italian Neo-Realism by almost two decades. Superb cast, wonderfully filmed and lit. This is about atmosphere.

Early piece of optimistic (!) belief of unity between France and Germany.

Interestingly this film was made straight after Pabst's Threepenny Opera (1931). Much sharing of actors, writers, crew.

Pabst is more recently famous for another film – Pandora's Box (1928).

Realism in Cinema:

Robert J Flaherty – Nanook of the North (1922), Man of Aran (1934) – founded (?) the documentary film.

Comradeship (German: *Kameradschaft*, known in France as *La Tragédie de la mine*) is a 1931 dramatic film with socialist overtones directed by German director Georg Wilhelm Pabst. The French-German co-production drama is noted for combining expressionism and realism (predating the Italian neo-realist films).[1]

1930s realism and ongoing influences:

John Ford – How Green Was My Valley (1941) Welsh coal miners. To be filmed in Wales but WWII interfered – 80 acre set in Santa Monica mountains. B&W because the flowers not Welsh flowers thus wrong colour.

John Huston - African Queen (1951)

Tony Richardson – Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962)

Ken Loach – Kes (1969)

Capolla - The Godfather – 3 parts (1972-)

Michael Cimino - Deer Hunter – (1978)

Francis Ford Cappola – Apocalypse Now (1979)

Sergei Leone – Once Upon a Time in America (1984)

Synopsis:

After the end of [World War I](#), due to the [Treaty of Versailles](#), an old German mine is split in two because of the new border, and the mine is closed off at the border, including an underground mine. The economic downturn and employment situation adds to tension between the two countries as German workers seek employment with the French but are turned away.

In the French part of the mine a fire breaks out and they try to contain the fire by building brick walls. The Germans continue to work on their side.

Nonetheless the fire gets out of control, causing an explosion that traps many French miners. In response, Wittkopp ([Ernst Busch](#)) appeals to his bosses to send a rescue team. As they ride out of town to help, the leader of the German rescue effort explains to his wife that the French are men with women and children and he would hope that they would come to his aid in similar circumstances.

Meanwhile, a trio of German miners breaks through a set of steel bars that mark the 1919 border. On the French side, an old retired miner (Alex Bernard) sneaks into the shaft hoping to rescue his young grandson (Pierre-Louis).

The miners forget their nationalities and past troubles and try to build a new camaraderie on the foundation of human solidarity.

The Germans successfully rescue the French miners, not without some interesting difficulties. After all the survivors are rescued, there's a big party with speeches about friendship between the French and Germans. The film shows a new idealistic unity between the miners, despite the political and nationalistic obstacles that still remain.

At the end, ironically, French officials rebuild the mining gate, and return to the *status quo ante*.

Cast[[edit](#)]

- [Alexander Granach](#) as Kasper
- [Fritz Kampers](#) as Wilderer
- [Ernst Busch](#) as Wittkopp
- Elisabeth Wendt as Frau Wittkopp
- Gustav Puttjer as Kaplan
- Oskar Hocker as Obersteiger
- Daniel Mendaille as Jean Leclerc
- Georges Charlia as Emile
- Andree Ducret as Francoise
- Alex Bernard as Grand-Pere, Le Vieux Mineur
- Pierre-Louis as Georges - Le Petit Galibot
- [Helena Manson](#) as Rose, La Femme Du Mineur Blesse
- Willem Holsboer as Ingenieur Des Deutschen Bergwerk
- Marcel Lesieur as Albert
- Georges Tourreil as L'Ingenieur
- Fritz Wendhausen as Direktor Des Deutschen Bergwerk

Historical background:

Pabst took an actual historical event, a mining accident in 1906 in [Courrières](#), France, where rescue efforts were hampered by the lack of trained mine rescuers. Expert teams from [Paris](#) and Germany (miners from the Westphalia region) came to the assistance of the French miners. There were 1,099 fatalities, including children.[2]

Title:

Kameradschaft in [German](#) means a bond between soldiers or those who have similar opinions and are in friendship. The word is similar to [comradeship](#).

Critical response:

Film critic Daniel Curran calls the film "A heartfelt plea for peace and internationalism." While calling the narrative over-sentimental, Curran appreciated the film, writing, "Pabst's plea for a peaceful future is both noble and honest, his direction of the heartbreak and devastation [is] enhanced by the brilliant cinematography by Fritz Arno Wagner and Robert Baberske, and the frighteningly real set design by Erno Metzner and Karl Vollbrecht." [3]

When the film was released in the United States in 1932, [Mordaunt Hall](#), film critic for *The New York Times*, reviewed the film and liked the realism and the screenplay, writing, "[*Kameradschaft* is] one of the finest examples of realism that has come to the screen...[the] scenes in the mine are so real that one never thinks of them as being staged...[and] [t]hroughout the length of this tale of horror one feels as though one were permitted through some uncanny force to look into all parts of the mine...[and] all the noises and sounds are wonderfully natural." [4]

The staff at *Variety* magazine also gave the film a positive review. They appreciated the direction, story, and cinematography, writing, "Pabst has made it a powerful recounting and accentuates more the happenings than the men ... Photography and architecture are excellent and the sound is clear. Picture sometimes abrupt and there are some superfluous scenes but this is an outstanding film." [5]

Awards:

[National Board of Review](#): Top Foreign Films; 1932.[6]

Trivia:

Actors speak original dialects - both French and German.

One of the writers – **Ladislav Vajda** (1877-1933) was a frequent collaborator with Pabst and wrote many plays. Son Ladislav Vajda Jr became a director – It Happened in Broad Daylight (1958).

Alexander Granach (Kasper) studied acting under Max Reinhardt and was friendly with Bertolt Brecht. Played Kapolsky in Ninotchka. Wrote a famous biography - published at the same time in an English version, as There Goes an Actor posthumously in 1945. It was recognized at the time as a remarkable work, and has been republished as: From the Shtetl to the Stage: the Odyssey of a Wandering Actor, by Transaction Publishers, 2010.

Amazon Link:

http://www.amazon.com/From-Shtetl-Stage-Odyssey-Wandering/dp/1412813476/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&qid=1394677838&sr=8-5&keywords=granach

Fritz Kampers (Wilderer) - It was noted by the publication 'Neue Filmwoche' in 1948, that the busy Kampers in **one single day** acted in two movies, performed in two plays on stage, still managing to finish with an appearance in cabaret. Between 1918 and 1950 (the year of his death), he appeared in more than 260 films.

Ernst Busch (Witkopp) Extremely successful singer as well as actor. Berlin Kabaret singer. Appeared in original (1928) Threepenny Opera (as well as Pabst's film of it). Famous for Brecht's Life of Galileo – also friend of playwright. Ran a record label in GDR after the war. Recorded many Spanish Civil War & WWII songs. Germany's most prestigious school for stage acting and directing is named after the actor, the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts (Hochschule für Schauspielkunst „Ernst Busch“, HFS) in Berlin. For those interested – lots of Youtube clips of Busch songs.

Many connections between Pabst & Brecht.

Fritz Arno Wagner – Cinematography – moody, atmospheric lighting. Filmed Nosferatu (1922), M (1931). Regarded as one of the foremost exponents of cinematic expressionism in the 1920's.

Reviews:

Very good article:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/kameradschaft/>

Comments by David Thomson.

From his 'Biographical Dictionary of Film' (1994)

Describes Pabst as 'enormously accomplished as a realist and in his psychological exploration with his then called "X-ray eye camera". However Thomson notes that the film 'seems facile ...' and with its companion film 'Westfront (1918)' is no more

or less profound than Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). Pabst seemed to have opposing views depending on temperament. *Kameradeschaft* is a compromise between locations of a real mining town and clever studio reconstruction of mine tunnels. There were two endings shot – one hopeful, one despairing.

An early film about a catastrophe (in a coal mine)

[Emil Bakkum](#) from Netherlands, Utrecht
31 January 2011

This is another excellent film of director Pabst. Apparently the story is based on true events, which makes it even more interesting. It is nice to see as a main character Ernst Busch, the German singer of protest songs and a predecessor of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. But first of all, it is a film about a catastrophe, with lots of suspense. This time it is not a failing airplane, a sinking ship or a burning skyscraper, but an underground coal mine. The underlying theme is also fascinating and in fact quite simple, namely the international solidarity among miners.

The actual realization of this solidarity is another matter, and the film highlights the tension between hostility and collective interests on all levels. The stage is the borderland between France and Germany just after the First World War. Clearly there is still a lot of animosity between the two countrymen, even though the decision to declare war had been made on a governmental level (but why did the people cooperate?). The regional coal field is exploited by a French mine and an adjacent German one. The French part is afflicted by gas pockets, and eventually a huge explosion occurs, which leaves many French miners trapped. The subsequent rescue operation requires special equipment, notably oxygen masks. The German miners realize the general shortage of such equipment, and spontaneously send their own rescue teams to the disaster area. There are some original features, such as the underground gates separating the German and French galleries. The shots actually give you the feeling of being present in the mine (and this is even more supported by the black-and-white display). We witness the miserable life of the miners and their families, in general, and not restricted to just the times of disaster.

Then, after the completion of the rescue operation there is a fraternization between all the miners. "Pitman is pitman". Another interesting feature about this film is its cultural kinship with the later Bolshevik films, notably the ones from East-Germany (for instance *Sonnensucher*, about a uranium mine). A not so hidden message is that workers are mostly good and leaders are usually corrupt. Now there is some truth in the existence of professional deformations, but the Bolshevik film makers transformed it into a blatant dogma. Pabst manages to mediate the message in a credible form without creating caricatures. So in my opinion it is an enjoyable and historically important film.

A documentary akin to *Kameradschaft* and about the same period is "Ellende in de Borinage", of Joris Ivens. You can also consider *Germinal*, *Subterra*, *Matewan*, or the more recent *Harlan County War*. If you like social films, consider seeing my other reviews.

Toronto Film Society 2013.

Pabst, well—known for his films, *The Joyless Street*, *The Love of Jeanne Ney*, *The Three Penny Opera*, *Westfront 1918*, *White Hell of Pitz Palu*, etc., tells in this film of a mining disaster in the French workings of a coalmine on the Franco-German frontier. Founded on fact, it relates how the miners on the German side, breaking through the formal barriers of the frontier, go up to the rescue of their French comrades. Made as propaganda for international co-operation and against war, it remains at the same time one of the outstanding achievements of the early sound period, remarkable for its high degree of naturalism and for its imaginative use of realistic sound.

Quoted by John Grierson on Documentary (famous for *Night Mail* (1936)).

"Pabst has a fierce international idealism tucked away in his Teutonic interior. It blazes up in this film and adds both power and importance to everything he describes... Pabst's construction is the one I like best in cinema. He builds his little individual stories only slightly into the march of events. They punctuate it and give it point and whatever the emphasis on lost sons and brothers and lovers, the march of events never ceases to be the principal concern... There are a hundred details of fine direction ... and there are effects in the film which tear one to shreds... My only complaint against Pabst is an old one. He means the best things in the world, but he means them sometimes too obviously. He cannot let well alone, but must keep on underlining things already emphasised..."